



Introduction to Documentation Management for Lone Writers

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As a lone writer, you are the focal point of myriad documentation types, including proposals, plans, meeting minutes, customer requirements, functional requirements, use cases, test plans, design specifications, design documents, user guides, system administrator guides, installation guides, and training manuals. Unlike technical writers in documentation departments, who typically have documentation processes in place and share the workload with others, it's up to lone writers to see these documents through all stages of the documentation lifecycle: planning, writing, review, and publication. During each of these stages, you have to juggle a lot of egos—authors, subject matter experts, reviewers, and managers. It can be a daunting job. How can you gain control?

Processes and procedures provide a framework for documentation control. A controlled document adheres to specified requirements for its development, approval, issue, change, distribution, maintenance, use, storage, security, and disposal. Not all aspects of document control are necessary for every product—for instance, some organizations only have processes to manage revision. But the important thing is to have a process in place to define how documents are to be controlled and how input from the lone writer and stakeholders will be managed.

1. Defining a Process and Procedures for Documentation Control

Your process describes how documents are planned, written, distributed for review, revised, and retained, and refers to detailed procedures to carry out these steps. Many software packages are available that can be used to develop documents and control their revision, issue, access, storage, maintenance, and disposal, and also automate many of the procedures. Only tasks that need to be performed by staff will need to be defined in your procedure.

You'll need to develop procedures to cover each of the following elements of the documentation process:

- *Planning and budget for new documents*
- *Preparation of documents*: who prepares the documents, how they are drafted, conventions for text, diagrams, forms, and so on
- *Documentation naming conventions*: user guides, reference guides, training manuals, and so on
- *Documentation date conventions*: date of issue, date of approval or date of distribution
- *Document approval*: who approves the documents and how approval is identified
- *Printing and publication*: who carries out the procedures and who monitors them
- *Distribution of documents for review*: who carries out the procedure and how documentation reviews are conducted
- *Amendments to issued documents*: instructions and amendment status
- *Updating documents*: keeping documents current and conducting periodic review
- *Document security*: unauthorized changes, copying, disposal, computer viruses, fire and theft
- *Document maintenance*: how documents are filed

2. Creating a Documentation Review Board

A critical aspect of documentation control is ensuring that the document is “fit for use.” Fit for use means that the document satisfies customer requirements, is written for a specific audience, and satisfies the objective for which it’s written. The lone writer can try to carry out this process, but help from stakeholders throughout the organization will ensure the greatest accuracy.

The review board consists of the following members:

- *Author*—the person(s) assigned to create the document
- *Reviewers*—subject matter experts to judge the accuracy of the information and how well it fulfills audience needs and satisfies the intended purpose
- *Approver*—the person(s) with the authority to approve publication of the document

To avoid extensive lists of reviewers,



the author and approver may select a representative from each team of subject matter experts that can weigh in authoritatively on the document. The nominated reviewers may distribute the document within their teams, but they remain responsible for filtering and consolidating feedback before passing it to the author.

3. Conducting a Documentation Review

In the document review process, the author sends the document to the review board. To avoid conducting a meeting to review the document and solicit comments, the document is distributed via a document management server. Comments and suggestions for improvement can be added to the document using reviewing software like Adobe Acrobat 7 or Word’s comment feature. In this approach, comments are easily consolidated and given to the author and approver for review and response. For large or complex documents, a face-to-face walkthrough is conducted with reviewers and stakeholders to explain the design and collect feedback.

Reviews are conducted when you must do the following:

- Take remedial action to correct an error in the document or product.
- Update or clarify information.
- Validate a document for use (e.g., select documents for use in connection with a project, product, contract, or other application).

Noting changes in the document allows reviewers and approvers to easily identify what has changed, verify whether their proposed changes were incorporated as intended, and expedite the approval process. This system also enables auditors to easily identify what has changed and focus on the new provisions.

Whenever a document is revised, its status must be changed (for instance, by labeling it with the revision date, letter, number, or combination of issue and revision) to signify that it is not identical to the original.

Every additional change to a document should revise the revision. Version 1 may denote the original version. Sub-

Table 1. Roles and Responsibilities of the Approval Process

	Author	Reviewers	Approver
Writes the document.	Responsible	Informed	Informed
Selects reviewers and approvers.	Responsible	Informed	Consulted
Ensures the document is in an accessible area of the document management system (DMS).	Responsible	Informed	Informed
Sends an e-mail to reviewers (and approver) with a link to the document in the DMS (but not attaching the document), provides a reasonable deadline for feedback, and indicates how comments can be returned.	Responsible	Informed	Informed
Responds to comments in the next version of the document and informs reviewers of any comments that will not be addressed.	Responsible	Informed	Consulted
Approves the document and provides evidence of approval.	Informed	Informed	Responsible
Uploads approved version of the document in DMS (adds version or check-in if multiple writers possible), with the review records and the approval record.	Responsible	Informed	Informed

sequent changes can be identified as Version 2 or Version 1.1, depending on the extent of the changes. The filename should contain the revision in its title (<product name><type of document><version>). You will want to create standards for file name conventions of product names, document types, and versions.

4. Defining a Policy for Approving Documents

Approval means that designated authorities have agreed on the content of the document before making the document available for use. The goal is to ensure that a panel of reviewers has evaluated the documents. Consulting the reviewers is not just a courtesy, but a procedure that informs them of decisions taken and allows them the opportunity to reply. Table 1 shows the roles and responsibilities of the approval process.

When the document is approved, the following actions should take place:

- The approver informs the author by e-mail.
- The author changes the status of the document from Draft to Approved.

- The author sends the approved document, comments, and responses to the review board, and archives them in the appropriate directory of the documentation management server.
- The author files a copy of the e-mail from the approver in the quality records directory.

5. Ensuring that Documentation Is Available to Users

Documentation should be archived on a content management system (CMS) that is accessible by anyone who needs it. A CMS has functions and features to ensure that the appropriate access rights are given to public and private lists to maintain security and integrity of information. There are a number of CMS applications available for purchase.

Summary

Documentation management means regulating the development, approval, issue, change, distribution, maintenance, use, storage, security, and disposal of documents to ensure quality. It's not intended to create bureaucracy; it's intended to simplify one of the many tasks expected of lone writers. ①

SUGGESTED READINGS

Hoyle, David. *ISO 9000 Quality Systems Handbook* (fourth edition). Oxford, Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2001.

ISO 9001:2000, *Quality Systems-Model for quality assurance in design, development, production, installation and servicing.*

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